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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 GUATEMALA 000294

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SUBJECT: EXTRA, EXTRA! LETTER FROM GUATEMALA: THE BEST NEWS MONEY CAN BUY

REF: GUATEMALA 0163

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: PITY THE POOR REPORTERS IN GUATEMALA. WHIPPED INTO A FRENZY OF HATRED AGAINST THE PREVIOUS PORTILLO GOVERNMENT, THEY NOW HAVE HAD A YEAR TO ADJUST TO PRESIDENT BERGER'S CLEANER ADMINISTRATION. WITH NO OBVIOUS GOVERNMENTAL ENEMY, EDITORIALISTS HAVE STRUGGLED TO STAY ON AN ADVERSARIAL FOOTING. AND AT THE LOWEST END OF THE JOURNALISM SPECTRUM, THINGS ARE AS BAD AS EVER. WAGES ARE LOW, NEWSROOM RIVALRIES AFFECT ASSIGNMENTS, AND LACK OF PROFESSIONALISM FILLS PAPERS WITH EMBARRASSING ERRORS, OMISSIONS, AND POOR WRITING. ALTHOUGH THE THREAT OF GOVERNMENT VIOLENCE AGAINST REPORTERS HAS DISAPPEARED, GETTING CAUGHT UP IN A RURAL LYNCHING IS STILL A REAL THREAT. THIS CABLE, AN EXTRA EDITION AND FIFTH IN A SERIES OF "LETTERS FROM GUATEMALA," GIVES A SNAPSHOT OF THE CURRENT REPORTING CLIMATE. END SUMMARY.

THOU DOEST PROTEST TOO MUCH?

¶12. (SBU) PRENSA LIBRE, AL DIA, AND A NUMBER OF RADIO STATIONS CARRIED STORIES FEB. 2 ABOUT A HAM-HANDED ATTEMPT BY THE TRUCKERS' UNION TO BRIBE A GROUP OF JOURNALISTS AT A PRESS CONFERENCE IT CALLED TO ANNOUNCE -- OF ALL THINGS -- CONTRACT IRREGULARITIES. THE UNION OFFICIALS PASSED AROUND "FAFA" (ENVELOPES WITH CASH). THE ARTICLES AND SOUND BITES CARRIED LOTS OF INDIGNANT QUOTES FROM PEOPLE LIKE PRENSA LIBRE PUBLISHER AND CURRENT PRESIDENT OF THE INTER-AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION GONZALO MARROQUIN AS WELL AS RANK AND FILE REPORTERS ABOUT THE SHAMEFULNESS OF TRYING TO BUY OFF REPORTERS. PERHAPS THE STORY ILLUSTRATES HOW FAR GUATEMALAN MEDIA HAVE COME. BUT THEN AGAIN, THE SPACE AND VOLUME DEVOTED TO THE STORY SUGGESTS THAT COUPLING BRIBERY AND JOURNALISM IN GUATEMALA IS NOT UNCOMMON.

¶13. (SBU) THE WORD "FAFA," A CORRUPTION OF THE ENGLISH "HALF AND HALF" REFERS TO THE PRACTICE OF SPLITTING ANY TIPS, COMMISSIONS, OR BRIBES BETWEEN A REPORTER AND HIS EDITOR. A BRIBABLE REPORTER IS A "FAFERO," AND ONE CAN BE "FAFEADO." THE HAPLESS TRUCKERS UNION WAS ONLY FOLLOWING A TIME HONORED PRACTICE -- AND ONE THAT CERTAINLY STILL GOES ON. INDEED, WE OFTEN HEAR OF THE SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIREMEN AND PHOTOGRAPHERS. BOMBEROS, GENERALLY TRUSTED FAR MORE THAN POLICE, WILL NONETHELESS PUT IN CALLS TO PHOTOGRAPHERS WHEN ARRIVING AT AN ACCIDENT OR CRIME SCENE. THEY HAVE ALSO BEEN KNOWN (AGAIN FOR A FEE) TO PULL BACK A SHEET ON A CADAVER SO A PHOTOGRAPHER CAN GET AN ESPECIALLY GRUESOME SHOT. THEIR ALLEGED WILLINGNESS TO REARRANGE CRIME SCENES FOR JOURNALISTIC ENDS HAS LED TO GRUMBLING AMONG POLICE INVESTIGATOR UNITS.

¶14. (SBU) FORMER PRESIDENT ALVARO ARZU OFFICIALLY ENDED THE PRACTICE OF GOG ABOVE-BOARD SUBSIDIES TO JOURNALISTS AND PUBLISHED THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO HAD ACCEPTED BRIBES. THIS WHOLESALE ACTION BY THE GOVERNMENT FORCED PRIVATE ENTERPRISE AND MEDIA OUTLETS TO OVERHAUL THEIR PRACTICES AT LEAST FOR A TIME. MARROQUIN'S CAREFULLY WORDED STATEMENT, WHICH CALLED "THE ATTITUDE OF THE UNION LEADERS SHAMEFUL," WAS NOTEWORTHY IN THAT IT DID NOT CONDEMN THE PRACTICE PER SE, OR WARN JOURNALISTS AGAINST PARTICIPATING. ONE MIGHT HAVE EXPECTED MARROQUIN, SURELY IN HIS POSITION AS PRESIDENT OF THE INTER-AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION, TO GRASP THE CHANCE TO USE THE BULLY PULPIT MORE FORCEFULLY.

5.(SBU) THE FAFA CAN ALSO BE USED TO KILL A STORY. SHOULD THE SUBJECT OF A NEWS ITEM NOT WANT TO SEE HIS NAME IN PRINT, A WELL-PLACED FAFA IS A SIMPLE WAY TO END THE MATTER. NOT ALL REPORTERS ACCEPT FAFA, AS THE REPORTING OF THE TRUCKERS' UNION PRESS CONFERENCE E CONFIRMS. BUT NOT ALL EDITORS ARE SO UNEQUIVOCAL, GIVEN LOW NEWSROOM BUDGETS, LOW REPORTER SALARIES AND

HIGH TURNOVER. THERE IS PLENTY OF SPACE BETWEEN THE BEAT REPORTER, MANAGING EDITOR, COPY EDITOR AND HEADLINE WRITER. A REPORTER MAY NEVER KNOW FOR SURE IF HIS LEDE WAS CHANGED BY AN EDITOR BECAUSE IT READ BETTER, FIT BETTER, OR BECAUSE SOMEONE GOT TO ONE OF HIS EDITORS. FAFAS CAN ALSO INFLUENCE HEADLINES, PLACEMENT, AND SIZE OF THE STORY. THE PRACTICE BEDEVILS THE WORK OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PEOPLE, WHO CAN NEVER TELL IF THEIR PRESS RELEASE DIDN'T RUN BECAUSE IT WASN'T NEWSWORTHY, BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T PAY ENOUGH, OR BECAUSE THEY PAID THE WRONG PERSON.

16. (SBU) ONE MIGHT LOOK TO A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION TO PUT AN END TO SUCH PRACTICES. HOWEVER, GUATEMALA IS FREE OF THE "COLEGIO" ACCREDITATION SYSTEM FOR JOURNALISTS USED ELSEWHERE. WHILE U.S. JOURNALISTS MIGHT SEE THE ABSENCE OF A COLEGIO AS A GOOD THING, ITS ABSENCE HERE IS FELT. ON THE PLUS SIDE, THERE ARE NO RESTRICTIONS ON ENTRY; ANYONE CAN BE A JOURNALIST. THAT ALSO MEANS THERE ARE NO PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS, DUES, FEES, FINES, OR SELF- POLICING. ONE WORKS FOR AN EMPLOYER AND MEETS THE STANDARDS OF THAT NEWS OPERATION, PERIOD. IN GUATEMALA, REPORTERS TEND TO BE YOUNG, POORLY EDUCATED, POORLY PAID, AND AT THE MERCY OF PUBLISHERS WITH THEIR OWN AGENDAS. THE ONLY PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS, THE ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS OF GUATEMALA, THE CHAMBER OF JOURNALISM IN GUATEMALA AND THE RADIO TRANSMITTERS CHAMBER, ARE FILLED WITH RETIREES AND DISDAINED BY YOUNGER JOURNALISTS.

CAFTA? WHAT CAFTA?

17. (SBU) MEANWHILE, WE WERE SURPRISED THAT LEADING BUSINESS DAILY SIGLO 21 DIDN'T COVER THE CAFTA LEGISLATION ROLLOUT FEB. 1 BECAUSE OF "REPORTER ERROR." THEY SIMPLY MISSED THE STORY, DESPITE THE HIGH VISIBILITY OF THE DELIVERY OF THE LEGISLATION. THIS WOULD BE THE EQUIVALENT OF HAVING THE WALL STREET JOURNAL MISS AN OPEN MARKET MEETING OF THE FED. EVEN MORE TELLING, THEIR CONGRESSIONAL BEAT REPORTER FAILED TO PHONE IN OR FILE. EVIDENTLY, COMMUNICATION AMONG REPORTERS; BETWEEN REPORTERS AND EDITORS; AND AMONG THE NEWSPAPER MANAGEMENT IS NOT GOOD.

18. (SBU) THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME WE'VE NOTICED PROBLEMS AT SIGLO. WE RECENTLY SENT A YOUNG ECONOMICS SECTION REPORTER ON A FOREIGN PRESS CENTER TOUR TO INTERVIEW U.S. INDUSTRIAL LEADERS ABOUT CAFTA. HER EDITOR RAN ONLY ONE OF THE STORIES SHE FILED, PREFERMING THE WORK OF ANOTHER HOME-BASED REPORTER. OUR INQUIRIES ABOUT WHY A PAPER WITH NO U.S. BUREAU WOULD SQUANDER U.S. DATELINE REPORTING BY ONE OF ITS OWN STAFF LED TO COMPLICATED ANSWERS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL RIVALRIES, LACK OF COMMUNICATION, AND GENERAL MISMANAGEMENT, A FACT BORNE OUT BY THE CAFTA ROLLOUT DEBACLE.

19. (SBU) CROSS-TOWN RIVAL PRENSA LIBRE DID NO BETTER ON CAFTA. A STORY ABOUT THE ONGOING CONTROVERSY OVER DATA PROTECTION LEGISLATION AND GENERIC DRUGS IN LATE DECEMBER CARRIED THE ERRONEOUS INFORMATION THAT THE USG WOULD WITHHOLD ANTI-NARCOTICS FUNDING AND BLOCK AN IMF STANDBY AGREEMENT IF THE LEGISLATION STOOD. PAS QUICKLY CALLED THE REPORTER TO POINT OUT THIS ERROR. MEANWHILE, BOTH THE EDITORIAL WRITER AND A LEFT-LEANING COLUMNIST DECIDED TO MAKE THOSE "FACTS" THE CENTERPIECE OF THEIR WORK ON THE FOLLOWING DAY'S OPINION PAGES. NO MATTER HOW OFTEN WE HAVE SPOKEN TO THE VARIOUS REPORTERS AND EDITORS, WE'VE NEVER SEEN A CORRECTION, AND THESE ERRONEOUS "FACTS" KEEP SNEAKING INTO THE REPORTAGE.

REPORTER SAFETY

10. (SBU) WE CLOSELY MONITOR REPORTERS' FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND ARE ALERT TO THE SLIGHTEST HINT OF GOVERNMENT INTIMIDATION OR OTHER DANGERS TO REPORTERS ON THE JOB. IRONICALLY, THE ONLY RECENT DANGER SPRUNG FROM AN ONGOING CONTROVERSY OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S AFFIRMATIVE POLICY TOWARD MINING, IN WHICH AN AMERICAN REPORTER AND LONGTIME RESIDENT OF GUATEMALA HAD A FRIGHTENING EPISODE.

11. (SBU) THE GLAMIS GOLD MINING COMPANY BEGAN THE OVERLAND TRANSPORTATION OF A HUGE 17-TON STEEL CYLINDER, WHICH BECAME A SYMBOL FOR THE CONTROVERSY IN EARLY JANUARY IN A TOWN NEAR SOLOLA. THE CYLINDER'S PROGRESS TOWARD ITS DESTINATION IN SAN MARCOS WAS HALTED BY A LOW CLEARANCE PEDESTRIAN OVERPASS IN LAS TRAMPAS, CONSTRUCTED AND PAID FOR BY VILLAGERS. THE CYLINDER, STRANDED FOR SEVERAL WEEKS ON A TRAILER

WHOSE TIRES HAD BEEN FLATTENED, BECAME A MAGNET FOR OPPOSITION TO THE MINING IN GENERAL.

¶12. (SBU) AMCIT REPORTER CARLISLE JOHNSON, HOST OF THE DAILY ENGLISH LANGUAGE RADIO SHOW "GOOD MORNING GUATEMALA," DECIDED TO COVER THE SITUATION ON JAN. 7. JOHNSON MADE HIS WAY THROUGH TWO GROUPS OF RIOT-CLAD PNC TO LARGE NUMBERS OF INDIGENOUS PROTESTERS. JOHNSON IDENTIFIED HIMSELF AS A REPORTER TO THE PNC COMMANDER, PHONED EMISORAS UNIDAS RADIO STATION (WHICH CARRIES HIS DAILY SHOW), PUT THE NEWSROOM IN DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE POLICE CHIEF AND DECIDED TO LEAVE.

¶13. (SBU) AT THAT POINT HE WAS SURROUNDED BY A MOB OF INDIGENOUS PROTESTERS, LED BY THE MAYOR OF SOLOLA, WHO BEGAN CALLING FOR THE POLICE TO LEAVE. JOHNSON INTERVIEWED THE MAYOR. WHILE WAITING FOR POLICE TO CONTACT HEADQUARTERS FOR INSTRUCTIONS, JOHNSON DECIDED TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE PROTESTERS TO INTERVIEW OTHER MEMBERS OF THE GROUP, INCLUDING MEN CARRYING THE BASTONS INDICATING THEY WERE MAYORS OF OTHER NEARBY TOWNS. AFTER IT BECAME CLEAR THEY DID NOT SPEAK SPANISH (WHICH JOHNSON SPEAKS FLUENTLY) HE DECIDED TO CALL SOMEONE AND LET THEM KNOW WHERE HE WAS. HE SPOKE IN ENGLISH.

¶14. (SBU) THE GROUP ASSUMED HE WAS SPEAKING ENGLISH AS A WAY TO CALL SURREPTITIOUSLY FOR POLICE REINFORCEMENTS AND BECAME INFURIATED. SOMEONE BEHIND HIM SAID, "LET'S BURN THE GRINGO," AND SOMEONE ELSE SAID, "WE HAVE THE GASOLINE." JOHNSON INSISTED THAT HE BE TAKEN TO THE MAYOR OF SOLOLA. ESCORTED THERE, HE TOLD HIM THAT HE WAS CHARGING HIM WITH HIS SAFETY, THAT THE MAJOR KNEW HE WAS A LEGITIMATE JOURNALIST AND THAT THE CROWD HAD THREATENED TO LYNCH HIM. HE ASKED THE MAYOR WHICH HEADLINE HE WANTED: THAT HIS PEOPLE LYNCHED A GRINGO OR WERE PEACEFULLY OPPOSED TO MINING. THE MAJOR SPOKE TO THE CROWD IN KAOCHIKEL. THE MEN PARTED, ESCORTED JOHNSON TO HIS VEHICLE AND ALLOWED HIM TO LEAVE UNHARMED.

¶15. (SBU) CONCLUSION: BY ANY STANDARD, GUATEMALA ENJOYS A FREE AND ROBUST PRESS WHICH FACES NO DISCERNABLE GOVERNMENT HARASSMENT. NONETHELESS, THERE ARE REAL IMPEDIMENTS TO ADVANCES WITHIN THE PROFESSION, THE MOST SERIOUS OF WHICH ARE CORRUPTION FROM WITHIN, MISMANAGEMENT, AND INCOMPETENCE. AND PERHAPS THE BIGGEST THREAT OF ALL TO REPORTERS, BOTH GUATEMALAN AND FOREIGN, REMAINS THAT OF IGNORANCE PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS AGITATED BY THOSE WHO PREY ON THEIR FEAR OF FOREIGNERS, AS EVIDENCED BY JOHNSON'S EXPERIENCE.

HAMILTON